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[Home](#) > [News](#) > [Opinion](#) > [Editorials](#)

OPINION: Lack of action on unemployment benefits hurts in Pee Dee

Morning News

Published: October 25, 2009

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The S.C. General Assembly reconvenes Tuesday to correct a major mistake on unemployment benefits. Even though South Carolina has one of the highest unemployment rates in the nation at 11.6 percent, legislators allowed benefits to lapse for 120,000 people.

Unemployed residents could have received an additional seven weeks of emergency benefits from federal stimulus money if lawmakers had passed a law to change temporarily an index used to count people out of work.

The lack of action hurts significantly in the Pee Dee, where Marion County is suffering with 21 percent unemployment, the third-highest rate in the state. Marlboro (20.2 percent) and Dillon (17.2 percent) counties were in the top 10, while Williamsburg (15.4 percent) ranked 17th among the state's 46 counties. Florence and Darlington counties had rates of 11.7 and 13 percent, respectively.

The oversight lies at the feet of legislators, who were told of the need for action by advocacy groups for the poor, and with experts at state agencies charged with cutting through the red tape.

"They have so many issues that are thrown at them," Sue Berkowitz of the Appleseed Legal Justice Center said of legislators. "It's hard for them to separate this piece of unemployment insurance from another piece of unemployment insurance versus the fight between the governor and the legislature.

"And then you had that whole fight over whether we were going to be able to get the stimulus dollars. It just fell between the cracks."

House Labor, Commerce and Industry Committee Chairman Bill Sandifer contended in an interview that lawmakers were never made aware action was needed.

"Nobody ever informed us that that fund existed or that there was an opportunity to apply for those benefits whatsoever," Sandifer said.

S.C. Employment Security Commission Deputy Executive Director Allen Larson admitted his agency and lawmakers are partly to blame for the error.

"I'm not sure, really, who dropped the ball here because I know that it was discussed and we had a lot of discussions with all aspects of the recovery funds," Larson said.

Luckily, state leaders had the foresight to call a special session to correct the oversight.

In the Pee Dee, the economy has been slow to improve. The seven weeks of benefits are a lifeline for those in need.

The number of jobs in South Carolina grew by 2,500. State and local schools accounted for the growth with the first month of the academic calendar. Tourism, construction and retail lost jobs, however.

South Carolina has 98,000 fewer jobs than when the recession began in December 2007.

The two-day special session, called by Rep. Bobby Harrell and Senate President Pro Tempore Glenn McConnell, is not really the right time to bring up impeachment of Gov. Mark Sanford or reform of the state Employment Security Commission. Those issues can wait until January.

Recent announcements of jobs coming to Florence County and a \$7 million investment in the New South Lumber Co. facility in Darlington County are reasons for optimism.

“This will protect jobs and allow us to expand down the road when times get better,” New South President Doug Warstler said.

Until the economy improves, we hope the state does everything in its power to help those devastated by unemployment. Oversights and excuses are unacceptable in these trying times.

— *Unsigned editorials represent the views of this newspaper. Editorial Board members are Mark Laskowski (regional publisher), James Bennett (regional editor), Sam Bundy (sports editor), Kimberly Ginfride (news editor), David Johnson (regional circulation director), Charles Tomlinson (Lake City News & Post editor) and Jackie Torok (metro editor).*

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